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The Nature of the Psalms

During **his** lifetime, **David** composed sixteen **psalms** that related to different life situations. **He** became the poet of Isra'el. Therefore, during the study of **the Life of David**, several of **his** poems are included to give the reader the full picture of **David's** feelings at that time. For example, after **David's** son died, after **his** affair with Bathsheba, **he** wrote **Psalm 51**. Therefore, this is discussed right alongside the biblical account of **David's** sin in **Second Samuel 11:1-27** to give a much broader picture of **his** feelings. Other such **psalms** discussed in this commentary are **(Aq) Psalm 59, (Ay) Psalm 56, (Ax) Psalm 34, (Bb) Psalm 142, (Be) Psalm 52, (Bh) Psalm 63, (Bi) Psalm 54, (Bk) Psalm 57, (Cu) Psalm 132, (Cw) Psalm 60, (Df) Psalm 51, (Dq) Psalm 3, (Dt) Psalm 7, (Eh) Psalm 18, (Ei) Psalm 22,** and **(Em) Psalm 30.**

1. Religious lyric poetry: The Psalms are the largest collection of ancient lyrical poetry in existence. Lyric poetry directly expresses the individual emotions of the poet. As part of the TaNaKh, this poetry is also necessarily religious. Religious lyric poetry is the expression of these emotions and feelings as they are stirred by the thought of **YHVH** and directed by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**.

Many psalms address **ADONAI** directly with their poetic expressions of petition and praise. They reveal all the religious feelings of the faithful – fears, doubts, and tragedies, as well as triumphs, joys, and hopes. The psalmists frequently drew on their experiences for examples of people's needs and **God's** goodness and mercy. Singing of past deliverances in easily remembered didactic poetry provided support and comfort for believers in their hours of trial, as well as warning them against unbelief and disobedience. In this regard, the psalmists rejoiced over the Torah as their guide for conduct and direction for prosperity.

Because **the Psalms** formed the "hymnal" of the Temple, they often celebrate the ordinances of the sanctuary and rejoice in the privilege of drawing near to **the LORD** on **His** holy mountain. This aspect of **the Psalms**, combined with their display of personal religious feelings, makes them the most powerful and complete expression of the worship of ancient Isra'el. Set in the form of lyric poetry, they became unforgettable.

The Psalms reveal that the Israelites were an intensely religious people, worshiping **God** with a strong sense of right and wrong. Regarding themselves as **Ha'Shem's** covenant people, they oppose wickedness and unbelief. Their daily activities, the national celebrations, and their military activities were carried out with religious commitment. The fact that the songs reflect this commitment makes them all the more useful for the edification of the entire household of faith, both then and now.

2. Expressive language: Awareness is achieved through the use of images, symbols, figures, emotional vocabulary, and multiple meanings. The imagery used in **the Psalms** is earthy, for the Israelites were largely a nation of farmers and shepherds living in the countryside close to nature. It was also militaristic, because they were often involved in wars to conquer the Land, and defensive wars against the ravages of empires that at times were part of the discipline of **Ha'Shem**. Consequently, to fully understand the poetic expressions they used, one must understand the people's cultural experiences.

This expressive language enabled the psalmists to convey several things at the same time. Because the truth was presented in word pictures, it evoked in the reader the feelings that the poet had when he wrote the lines; it excited in the reader the emotional significance of the words as well as their intellectual meanings. For example, the poet could picture the vitality and stability of a godly person through the image of a tree planted by water, or the fear of the fainthearted through the image of melting wax, or the verbal attacks of the wicked through the imagery of swords and arrows. So a discussion of **the Psalms** must be sensitive to such images in order to appreciate both the intellectual and the emotional meanings of the poetry. In other words, **the Psalms** must be treated as religious lyrical poetry.

Several headings are used to designate the types of **psalms** in the book, Hebrew word *mizor*, translated *psalms*, heads 57 **psalms**. It signifies a song accompanied by stringed instruments. A *maskil* is probably a soul-searching poem, and 13 **psalms** are labeled with this heading. The Hebrew word *sir*, translated *song*, is used 12 times. The designation *miktam*, is found with 6 **psalms**. Its meaning is disputed and undetermined. The Hebrew word *palal*, meaning *prayers,* is seen in 5 **psalms**; and the Hebrew word *tehillah*, meaning *praise,* is used once.

3. Meter: The fact that **the Psalms** are artistic, means that they display in fuller measure and with greater frequency the components of artistic form, including

patterns, design, unity, balance, harmony, and variation. The psalmists were imaginative and creative; they regarded their artistry as crucial to the meaning of its content.

Meter is basic to the pattern of poetry. Hebrew poetry certainly has meter and rhythm, but it is not possible as yet to determine that meter with any degree of certainty. Most commentators are satisfied to count the number of accented Hebrew words or word units in a line as the basis of their poetical analysis. Because only a few **psalms** consistently follow a metrical pattern of accented words, attempts to reconstruct the text according to preconceived or novel ideas of meter are unconvincing.

4. Parallelism: The predominant feature of Hebrew poetic structure is the repetition of meaning in parallel expressions . . . or poetic parallelism. The biblical verse of poetry normally has two or more of these parallel units. The relationship between the parallel units must be studied to determine the emphasis of a verse as a whole. The words are not meant to rhyme, but are parallel in thought. Sometimes the parallelism is synonymous: **Then Isra'el entered Egypt; Jacob resided as a foreigner in the land of Ham (Psalm 105:23)**, sometimes the parallelism is contrasting: **In the morning [the grass] springs up new, but in the evening it is dry and withered (Psalm 90:6)**, and sometimes one of the parallel units is a metaphorical illumination of the other: **As a father has compassion on his children, so ADONAI has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103:13).**

5. Stylistic arrangements: Apart from a few **psalms**, the arrangement of lines of poetry into stanza or strophes is not common. **Psalm 119** is perhaps the best known for this, for it divided into 22 strophes of eight verses each. A few **psalms** have a refrain to mark out their strophic arrangements (**42:5**, **11**, **43:5**, **57:5** and **11**, **80:3**, **7** and **19** for example).

Certain **psalms** are alphabetically arranged as acrostics, that is, each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in consecutive order (**Psalms 9** and **10** together are one acrostic poem, and **Psalms 25, 34, 37 111-112, 145**). This style is also used in **Psalm 119** where each of the eight verses in each of the 22 sections begins with the same letter. Among other purposes, this would have made it easier to memorize them.

6. Music and melody: In the praises, both Isra'el's music and musical instruments

are mentioned in **the Psalms**. Cymbals, wind instruments, and string instruments of various types are named, showing that musical accompaniment must have been on a grand scale. Also, many times the headings of **the Psalms** say **for the director of music**, occurring 55 times. Many speculate that it probably referred to the chief musician in charge of Temple music. These may have comprised a collection of songs sung at the Temple. **The sons of Korah** found in **Psalms 42**, **44** through **49**, **84**, and **87-88** probably refers to musical performers from this family.[15]

Other headings serve as musical indicators. The phrase *with stringed instruments*(harp and lyre) appears in **Psalms 4**, **6**, **54-55**, **61**, **67** and **76**. *According to sheminith* is in **Psalms 6** and **12.** Because its form is related to the Hebrew word for eight, it probably means *with an eight stringed lyre. To the tune of "The Death of a Son"* in **Psalm 9** is a variant of *according to alamoth* in **Psalm 46**. The word *alamoth* is related to the Hebrew word for *maidens* and may signify a female choir, a band of maidens playing tambourines or a musical term for a high musical setting (soprano). The expression *for flutes* in **Psalm 5** is obscure, as is *shiggaion* in **Psalm 7** and *according to gittith* in **Psalms 8**, **81** and **84**. The word *Selah* occurs 71 times in **the Psalms**. Its use particularly in the first three books suggests its antiquity. **It was likely a term of direction to the musicians who accompanied the recital of the Psalms, probably an indication that instrumental music was to be introduced at this point.** But its precise significance in Isra'el's worship remains unclear. But it could possibly mean *to lift up* or *exalt*.

Several psalms also include melody indicators. *To the tune of the lilies* is found with **Psalms 45, 60, 69,** and **80.** *To the doe of the morning* occurs in **Psalm 22**. *To the silent dove of the distances* is the heading of **Psalm 56**. *Do not destroy* occurs in **Psalms 57-59** and **75**. Since the word *al-mahalath* in **Psalm 53** is related to the Hebrew word for *sick* or *sickness* it has been suggested that what is in view is a prayer for a sick person. The meaning of *al-mahalath leannoth* in **Psalm 88** is disputed and uncertain.[16]